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ABSTRACT

A principal and two teachers of a local elementary school were interviewed to establish a shared definition of humor in the classroom. A multidimensional definition emerged with intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects. The teachers were observed to determine if specific uses of humor would be evident in their classrooms. Four types of teacher behaviors were labeled as categories of uses of humor: (1) connecting personally with students; (2) enlivening the learning experience; (3) using alternatives to authoritarian discipline; and (4) encouraging risk-taking and higher level thinking. Through this case study method, relevant data were gathered allowing a description of humor and its uses in the classroom. Variations on this project might include: explorations of the uses of humor in upper-grade classrooms, comparisons of the uses of humor with different ability level students, and applications of humor to special education settings. Another avenue of research might involve an investigation of the misuses of humor in the classroom. (LLL)

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HUMOR IN THE CLASSROOM:
OPTIONS FOR ENHANCING LEARNING

A PRESENTATION AT THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE
CEC/COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN WITH
BEHAVIOR DISORDERS

SEPTEMBER 25, 1989

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

As I began preparations to teach a new class, several critical questions came to mind. How would I connect with the students? What methods would I use to make the classroom experience interesting? How could I encourage students to stay on task? How could I encourage participation and higher level thinking? My answer to all four questions was, "use HUMOR."

That was not a new answer for me. It has been my response and my approach in most situations, especially in teaching. However, I have questioned that mode, wondering if a good teacher always uses humor. Further, I have pondered whether teachers would agree on a definition of humor and whether its specific uses in the classroom could be delineated. Naively, I formulated a research plan: (a) interview a few teachers to develop a concensus on the definition of humor and (b) observe in classrooms to see humor at work. It sounded simple. However, during the two months of investigation, confusion became my partner.

A case study method was employed including interviews with a principal and two teachers of an elementary school, observations in these two teachers' classrooms, and feedback sessions with all participants. The end result was a multidimensional definition of humor and a list of categories of the uses of humor in the classroom.

Cast of Characters

The research site was a suburban public school serving kindergarten through fifth grade in an open-classroom environment. During the initial interview, the principal, FM, appeared to have a personal interest in uses of humor in education and shared some research he had done in the area. After the interview, he arranged for me to work with two teachers: a female second grade teacher and a male first grade teacher. It is possible that the principal chose them because they exemplified his definition of humor, but it also could have been that they were teachers who were open to research and learning.

With great anticipation, I went to meet the teachers and set appointments for interviews. The second grade teacher, JC, was in her classroom finishing the tasks of the day. She was smartly dressed and exuberant. JC stated that she was curious about the project but wondered modestly why the principal had chosen her. Her room was one of four classes that shared one large community space. JC's area was alive with posters and learning centers. Several large stumps on the side of the room caught my eye. JC explained that those were "thinking logs."

I found JMc, the first grade teacher, taking a group of late students to the bus. He was casually dressed, looking at home in jeans. When he reached the exit of the school, he said good-bye to each student by name and hugged many of

them. As we walked down to his room, he surmised that he was chosen for the humor research because he was know as a funny teacher. He agreed to participate in the project, but wanted to talk a little about a class he had taught several years before. JMc reported that he had to use less humor with that group because those students got out of control so easily.

JMc's room was smaller than JC's because there were five first-grade classes, compared with four second-grades sharing a similar size space. His room seemed crowded, but creativity abounded. There was a dress-up center hung with costumes, a table with games, a block center, and a sand table. There were things on the walls everywhere, giving a vital, but less than careful, look to the environment.

Interviews and Definitions

Through interviewing, I intended to develop a shared definition of humor in the classroom. Many words in our language have specific meanings with shared understandings. I thought humor was one of those words. I assumed that most people associated humor with laughing or being entertained. In the classroom, I thought that would translate to funny teachers and students who enjoyed learning, because they laughed. Instead, humor appeared to be a word that had a personal definition to each of the three educators interviewed and was manifested differently in each classroom.

The principal, FM, defined humor as a "sense of fun in working with others." He focused on a "positive school climate", one in which teachers were not "too serious." He shared part of a definition with which he was familiar: humor "contributes a balanced perspective." FM described a humorous teacher as "jolly" and one who "appreciated what was amusing." The essence of the principal's definition seemed to involve enjoyment. He said that "without humor, it's [a job] not a pleasant experience." FM also noted, "people probably do not agree on what is funny, but people do like to see others enjoying things. Laughter can be contagious."

The principal's portrayal of humor in education was not what I expected. I began to wonder how divergent the teachers' definitions might be from my own or their principal's. The next interview was with JC. She knew unequivocally what humor was: "Humor is looking at the light side. Looking at the real person. Humor is enjoying life. Humor is not the punch line of a joke or the end result of some narrative." She didn't think comedians were funny, "Humor is not Robin Williams prancing all over the stage, doing his thing." JC valued honest joy. She mentioned frequently the importance of being herself and letting children be themselves, putting several words together to form a picture of this type of humor: "openness is the bud of humor ... openness, creativity, fun, smiles,

laughter, being myself." And, "humor is not being flippantly silly; humor is looking at the person for what they really are and tuning-in to the things that they enjoy in life."

There were some commonalities between the principal's and JC's definitions. They both appeared to be talking about the light side of life, creating positive environments, and enjoying what one did. The feeling was different, however. The principal had an intellectual approach. He shared ideas regarding workshops he had attended, goal setting activities he had thought about, and quotes he collected in a notebook. Whereas, there was a "joie de vivre" about JC's approach. She talked about real children, sitting on stumps thinking, and laughing with children about mistakes she had made. Understandably, these two professionals have different roles, but there was more to their differences than that. Possibly a definition paradigm was emerging, but it was too early yet to say.

Enter the third piece of the puzzle, JMc. This first grade teacher began his definition of humor by saying, "I'm glad I have humor ... I notice that the children laugh or that the children are happy. And it ties together that a happy child is a learning child." He saw humor as a "union" between people. He mentioned several times his appreciation of seeing children "gut laughing." In contrast to the previous definitions, JMc associated humor with the words

"silly", "twist", "surprise", and "unusual." And, although he thought that "humor is probably always funny," he thought that you didn't always have to laugh. JMc also appreciated humor that was "subtle" and "clever."

JMc recounted an inservice training done by William Glasser at their school that year. One of the points that he recalled from this inservice was that when children put pieces together, they laugh and laughter often means learning. JMc commented that a lot of learning must be going on in his class because they laugh a lot. There was a great deal of love in his description of the children. JMc stressed that "love is the most important thing in the world and ... maybe humor is a good way to express that love."

After each interview, I had typed a transcript in order to give the participants an opportunity to clarify any ambiguous or misleading statements. JMc had misplaced the transcript on his desk twice, so, by the time we had rescheduled a time to talk, I was finished observing. Yet, even though I had collected all my data, the multi-dimensional definition of humor still had not emerged in a meaningful way until this talk.

While talking to JMc, it occurred to me that there was a common element among all three participants regarding an enjoying of life. Maybe humor meant enjoying life. However, JMc corroborated with the other teacher on the importance of humor's ability to connect people. And, he

amplified the principals approach of an enjoyment of the intellectual aspects of humor. This is when it became clear to me that attempting to force humor into one definition was artificial and confining. As we talked, I saw an image of a circle with three parts: intellectual, spiritual, and physical. The personal definitions of humor that had emerged had these three aspects to them.

Possibly each person espoused one aspect more than the other; each person had an area of the circle they moved within. It seemed that FM, the principal, was strongly intellectual but when he talked about teachers flowing with the energy, he was more spiritual. JC radiated a joyful approach, which I would call spiritual, but when she laughed with the children, it was physical. JMc talked of "gut laughs" which is clearly a physical manifestation of humor, and, yet, he moved sometimes toward the intellectual side and sometimes to the spiritual side.

Definition of Humor in the Classroom

Based on these three interviews, I would say that humor in education could be understood in terms of a personal definition with intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects.

An intellectual definition of humor in the classroom would be: Humor is appreciating what is amusing, unusual or clever; it may be enjoying a subtle word play or feeling the excitement of a new understanding; and, humor contributes to

a balanced, positive school climate.

Spiritual aspects of humor would be contained in this definition: Humor is an expression of love; it encourages an honest union between people; humor enlivens learning by tuning-in to what others enjoy; and, it is looking at the light side of things.

Humor is also a physical experience in the school: Humor is laughing, sometimes "gut" laughing at funny and silly things; it is a release of tension that removes obstacles which impede learning; laughter is contagious; and, humor energizes people in a learning environment.

Observing: Emerging Categories

I wondered how the portrayal of humor I had gleaned from the interviews would interface with what I would observe in the classrooms. Over a one month period, I was in the classroom three times in each grade observing all time periods of a typical school day.

Observing JC: Categories Emerge

During the initial observation of JC, I saw an exuberance that was consistent with her interview. This second grade classroom was alive with activity. Many of the interactions between students and the teacher were too fast to capture verbatim. I was writing furiously, looking around for clues, and hoping for insights.

As children arrived in the morning, JC greeted them with utterances of joy such as "This is going to be a great

day." When a student who had been absent in the morning, came after lunch. JC welcomed him with, "What a nice surprise." These interactions exemplified one of JC's definitions of humor, "connecting with others" or, as the first grade teacher would later describe it, "removing obstacles to learning."

Next, I became aware of an accumulating list of JC's silly words such as "scootch" and "blap" used to make routine situations seem more interesting. At the end of a lesson on nutrition, JC told the children that when she said "dairy," they were to hop from where they were seated to their desks. This was fun! Then, I realized this was another category, expressions or activities designed to enliven routine learning.

Another interesting pattern emerged. I noticed that JC avoided authoritative discipline. Instead of ordering the class to clean up and straighten desks, she said, "Our class record is 10 seconds to get ready to go. I wonder if we can beat our record." Rather than angrily telling a student that he had not listened to directions, she teased, "I tricked you." These were alternatives to the use of authority, a third category.

Three categories of the use of humor had now emerged: (a) connecting with students, (b) choosing alternatives to authority, and (c) enlivening routine activities. Before observing again, I reviewed the interview transcripts for

other possible categories and noted that both teachers shared ideas about encouraging thinking and risk-taking through the use of humor. Would this be a fourth category?

During a group lesson, JC asked a lot of questions, and there was a great deal of interaction. However, after asking a more difficult question, only two children raised their hands. JC said, with a humorous look of mock disbelief, "Only two people have ideas?" She waited. Several children raised their hands. She waited again and, soon, almost half of the students had their hands raised. This procedure had encouraged thinking. Another time, a student raised her hand but then put it down. JC moved close to her and said teasingly, "I won't laugh too hard if you get it wrong." The student gave a correct answer. JC had encouraged risk-taking.

JC also encouraged risk-taking by the self-concept she modeled. At the beginning of a spelling quiz, JC stood in front of the class ready to read her list. A student in the front row said, "That's not the spelling list, Ms. C. That's the lunch count." The children laughed but JC didn't flinch as she said, "The first word is 'cheese pizza'." The process was fun and JC had demonstrated that it was O.K. to make mistakes.

Indeed, encouraging thinking and risk taking was a fourth category. Then I observed a situation that made me realize that humor not only encouraged thinking, it could

also push students to higher levels of thinking. A large poster of a ketchup bottle was taped to one of the classroom walls. On the bottle was printed "Catch-up" and "BeHeinz" with students' names taped below. At recess time, JC stood in front of the poster and said, "The following people did not finish their work and will stay in for recess." While she read the names taped to the poster, a student stood up with great excitement and announced, "I get it. When you are 'beHeinz' in your work, you have to 'Catch-up'...get it? Get it?" Many students joined in his laughter. It was a perfect moment of the joy of insight. JC explained later that she utilized a similar poster every year without explanation, waiting for the insight to come spontaneously, as it did at that moment.

Four categories of the uses of humor in the classroom had clearly emerged from my observations in JC's class:

1. Connecting with students and removing obstacles to learning
2. Enlivening routine activities
3. Using alternatives to authoritarian discipline
4. Encouraging risk-taking, thinking, and higher level thinking

Observing JMc: Comparison/Integration

The next step was to observe in JMc's first grade classroom. I wondered if the behaviors I would observe in this room would fit into the four categories?

The day began with students straggling into the classroom over a 10 minute period. JMc greeted each child and handed out individual planbooks which were used to guide students activities during the day. During this time, there was a great deal of laughter and perscnal contact. As students became involved in activity centers, JMc sat down at their tables and played games. As more students entered, JMc encouraged them to join in the activities. Truly these activities fit into Category 1, connecting with students. I recalled that during JMc's interview, he had stated that humor set the mood and allowed students who might be having a hard time, to ease into the day.

Category 2, enlivening the classroom, was evident thoughout the three days of observations. Although JMc didn't use made up words as JC did, he was sillier and more spontaneous. The children found it very funny when he used body language to imitate their behavior. JMc was able to role play a problem in a way that both focused attention and drove home a message. For example, when too many students had interrupted him to ask unnecessary questions, he got everyone's attention and did a role play of a child who got his paper dirty and didn't know what to do without asking the teacher.

There were many examples of spontaneous humor. When JMc was losing the students' attention in a reading group, he started a Simon Says game. Then he asked, "How come you

do what Simon Says but not what Mr. Mc says?" Students laughed. Another time during reading group when the noise from the other classes in this open setting became distracting, JMc had the students repeat after him as he composed the following poem:

"Oh, the noise is just killing me.
Oh, give me some walls.
I wish people would keep there voices down,
And not create such a squall."

This type of humor seemed to benefit the teacher as well as the children. When a student mentioned Superman, another student said "Superman is dead." JMc looked into his shirt as if to check for his costume and then, laughed. The students didn't seem to be aware of what he was doing. This may have been for my benefit; yet, it occurred to me that humor could also serve to make the learning environment more fun for the teacher, as well as the student.

Because the humor in this classroom was so often spontaneous, I wondered if spontaneity needed to be a fifth category. However, after analyzing these instances in terms of the four categories, I decided that spontaneity was a process rather than a use of humor. A teacher could be spontaneous using all four functions of humor.

Although the use of humor was clearly evident in both classrooms, JC & JMc had different styles, particularly regarding classroom management. It was natural for JC to

find a humorous mode to avoid a confrontation. In contrast, it seemed that JMc relied on having so much fun that the children would want to behave well because he had "removed the obstacles to learning." However, the result of this approach did not always seem to be to his liking. This was evident in the number of times he appeared annoyed with students during my observations.

Although JMc spent more of his time talking to students about their behavior than did JC, in so doing, he shared more thoughts about how individuals should take responsibility for themselves and how the class needed to work together. This type of interaction may lead to higher level thinking skills, because an adult is sharing the process of thinking with children. JMc's style naturally encouraged thinking. During "calendar time," he remarked that the class had not indicated the weather for the day before. He said, "Meena, go to the window and see what yesterday's weather was like." Meena jumped up and ran half-way across the room and then stopped. She laughed and returned to the circle.

When several children were disappointed that they had no gotten a chance to answer a question, JMc said, "Hold onto that thought. I may come to your homes in the middle of the night and ask you for the answer." Throughout the observation period, teacher-student interactions were replete with amusing images and creative thinking.

JMc also encouraged risk-taking. After realizing an error, he modeled a healthy approach to self by saying humorously, "I made a mistake. Throw me out the window." During the reading activities I observed, JMc asked students to predict what was going to happen next in a story based upon pictures or clues. He said, "take a guess, and then check out what you thought. Yes, no, yes, no, learning is a risk."

Categorizing the Data

The final observation period confirmed that the four categories were sufficient to describe the data and, yet, were mutually exclusive. Although questions arose, the categories remained viable.

In order to analyze patterns of the uses of humor in each class, I numbered my field notes according to the four categories. Instances of humor could be counted in more than one category. For example, JC said, "Let's get off the desks and move back. Can you scootch down a smidgy-widgy?" These seemed to combine alternatives to discipline and enlivening with funny words. Chart 1 summarizes the frequency and per cent of each category of the uses of humor by teacher.

Chart 1: Frequency and Per Cent
of Each Category of Humor by Teacher

	# instances/ % teacher total JC	# instances/ % teacher total JMc
1. Connecting	16/ 18%	4/ 8%
2. Enlivening	25/ 28%	14/ 28%
3. Using alternatives	41/ 46%	18/ 36%
4. Encouraging thought	7/ 8%	14/ 28%

The appearance of fewer instances on the above chart for JMc is not reflective of the general atmophere in his classroom. Sometimes instances of humor did not lend themselves to counting as in the morning greeting time which was a major part of category one. Also funny use of body language wasn't always documented.

A significant pattern was evident in the relatively high use of alternatives to discipline. It appeared that humor in these classrooms was most frequently employed to

maintain order while keeping an enjoyable flow to the learning rather than engaging in authoritative confrontation.

The origin of the word humor has interesting implications for its uses in the classroom. Humor originally referred to the four elemental fluids. Eventually, the word came to be associated with mental constitution. When one was considered to be out of humor or in a bad humor, he or she needed to be soothed. This helps to focus the uses of humor in the classroom. Learning in the classroom has a flow, and there are behaviors that teachers use to enhance this momentum. The four categories of humor add to the flow of the learning process.

Summary and Recommendations

A principal and two teachers of a local elementary school were interviewed to establish a shared definition of humor in the classroom. However, it was found that humor had a personal meaning for each participants. A multidimensional definition emerged with intellectual, spiritual, and physical aspects.

The teachers were observed to determine if specific uses of humor would be evident in their classrooms. Four types of teacher behaviors were labeled as categories of uses of humor: (a) connecting personally with students, (b) enlivening the learning experience, (c) using alternatives to authoritarian discipline, and (d) encouraging risk-taking

and higher level thinking.

Through this case study method, relevant data were gathered allowing a description of humor and its uses in the classroom. Variations on this project might include: explorations of the uses of humor in upper-grade classrooms, comparisons of uses of humor with different ability level students, and applications of humor to special education settings. Another avenue of research might involve an investigation of the misuses of humor in the classroom.